William James on the Courage to Believe

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Epilogue

On Becoming Humanly Wise

There are flaws and missteps in James's justification of "The Will to Believe." The content analysis presented in my first chapter tries not to hide those flaws; on the contrary, I have attempted so to present James's argument that the reader will later recognize the points at which critics have directed their fire, while at the same time highlighting a set of features which eventually argues in James's defense.

It would, however, be impetuous for the reader of James's lecture to dismiss it out of hand by pointing to James's ebullient manner, his sporting metaphors, or his congenital impatience with the ways of exact technical thought: my first step (Chapter 2) in defending James took the form of showing how profoundly serious he always was about such weltanschaulich questions as the religious hypothesis. The Wager argument, and the capital John Hick made of it in his damning critique of James's lecture, suggested probing James's relationship with Pascal and with his celebrated "reasons of the heart" (Chapter 3). Again, James's seriousness receives confirmation, for his debt to Pascal may have been larger than he consciously recognized; it may, in fact, have been his lifelong familiarity with the Pensées which sensitized him to the decisive influence Renouvier's fideistic thought was to exert upon him at the crisis-moment of his young life.

But difficulties with his lecture still remain. Can James be acquitted, for instance, of the charge of commending "wishful thinking"? My fourth chapter presented both the objection and a series of responses Jamesian defenders
have proposed to answer it. Both objectors and defenders, though, share a number of common assumptions which, once explicitly stated, reveal themselves as questionable. They assume, first off, that the "will" to believe can be evaluated by excogitating outcome cases of a streetcar or truck-driver sort; my fifth chapter tried to show that James, on the contrary, was primarily concerned with over-beliefs, even while his own appeal to outcome illustrations introduced elements of confusion into his main argument. Chief among those confusions is his talk of faith's "creating" the facts of its own verification, as though such faith truly bears on weltanschaulich issues.

But James himself later encouraged us to regard that kind of fact-creating faith as ultimately irrelevant to over-belief decisions. Discard it we did, and passed on to explore a second assumption: that he entitled the passional side of our nature to intervene only after the intellectual side had done its dispassionate work, and failed to resolve matters. My sixth chapter presented evidence to show that James, both early and late, clung consciously and tenaciously to the contrary view: our passional natures not only do but must exert a precursive influence on all our cognitive activities, and quite especially in resolving those weltanschaulich questions in which the facts themselves are essentially, not merely accidentally, ambiguous.

Does this Jamesian contention reduce all our weltanschaulich options to products of our passional nature, and plunge us once again into the morass of "wishful thinking"? There are passages, one has to admit (Chapter 7), in which James seems to give countenance to that view: our philosophies could well be intellectual constructs eudaemonistically chosen because of their consonance with our inborn temperaments, and with the wants and interests corresponding to those temperaments. But the passional, for James, is a more articulated entity than that: not only are there temperamental differences from one individual
to another, but each individual boasts other strata of the passional besides temperament. In his alertest thinking, James brings us to consider the voluntary labor of education and habit formation whereby we mold these inborn endowments into fully-formed “character,” with its capacity for moral judgment; this is what is put to the test in over-belief decisions. Central to any rightly formed character, moreover, James contends, is the freely developed capacity for making those ultimate choices not simply at the behest of our temperamental wants and interests, but in the “strenuous” moral mood—a mood which, synthesizing eudaemonism and deontologism, makes us actually “want” a world that makes austere, sometimes even shattering, demands on the slumbering hero dwelling in each of us.

This robust streak of deontologism has, generally speaking, been little noticed by James’s loyal defenders; it is almost as though they thought it an embarrassment better passed over in silence. But without it James’s defense of belief falls into a shambles, and the sinew goes out of his view of the universe. How typical, for instance, his way of settling the argument between optimist and pessimist: he wastes no time arguing that our eudaemonistic cup is half-full rather than half-empty; he goes straight for the deontological jugular, to arouse those “wilder passions” that fuel response to “higher fidelities” like justice, truth, or freedom. “Stop your snivelling,” one can almost hear him scold, and “get to work like men.”

That indispensable deontological stress is both final testimony to his seriousness about matters of religious belief, as well as the feature of his thought which effectively silences the charge of “wishful thinking.” In concert with the eudaemonism that James refuses to divorce from it, that deontologism subtly threads its way through, and lends coherence to, those two key metaphors he proposes to illuminate the dynamics of belief: the friendship and
symphonic metaphors. But the Jamesian universe requires him to put forward, at the end, a stronger metaphor than either of those. The evils of our universe are as menacing and real as any robber band; the crevasses we must leap might terrify the hardest Alpinist. Friendships and symphonies may illustrate justification for a "right," a "willingness," even a preferential "readiness," to believe. Those more tempered attitudes serve us well in normal times. But risk, danger, evil call for a sterner attitude: despite his own later demurrals, I submit that James was not all that misguided in originally arguing that there are features and moments in human life which challenge us to stiffen our "willingness" into a genuine "will" to believe. Clarify its fundamental intentions, and straighten out its occasional missteps, and that argument can still take hold on minds and hearts today—and, one hopes, for a thousand tomorrows.

But James should not be considered a lone voice crying in the philosophic wilderness. His links with Renouvier and Pascal are relatively clear, but he speaks for a distinguished tradition that runs longer and more broadly than those two forebears. It is suggestive, in fact, how often Western philosophy has found itself compelled by the developments of its history to take the turn James proposes, and proclaim the revenge of that forgotten truth: that the pursuit of wisdom inexorably grips the whole human being, not merely brain and mind, but heart, emotions, imagination, and sensibility as well. This is the fact of the matter, and James is surely right to remind us of that much. The most solemn warnings against our allowing the passional side of our nature to intrude upon the search for human wisdom are themselves dictated by that passional nature, speaking in one of its moods, and a one-sided mood at that. That mood comes down, as James trenchantly puts it, to one of timidity: we are advised so to dread making mistakes that we slink away from where the fighting is at
its thickest, most testing, and at the same time most decisive. Is life worth living? Are we free, and do our human actions really count toward the issue of the cosmic struggle into which we have been plunged? Does there exist an Infinite Claimant who urges us to live in the “strenuous” moral mood? Such questions have lain at the center of humankind’s concern since the dawn of reflection; and yet, our generals would order us to take our seats at the outer edges of the struggle, and endlessly sharpen the weapons of epistemological objectivity which, the history of thought has proven over and over again, never come up to the challenge that weltanschaulich questions throw down to us.

Banish subjectivity, and an entire spectrum of questions drifts out of philosophy’s range—the very questions about which humankind most sorely needs, and is called upon most peremptorily, to take sides. Abstain from taking sides until every tiniest epistemological scruple has been put to rest, and you have, without acknowledging it, taken sides already. For the claim to have banished subjectivity is an illusory claim; subjectivity still skulks in the wings, whispering its cues, but now in their most desiccating tones. The only honest solution lies in recognizing the ineradicable influence subjectivity wields in human thought, confronting it squarely, and educating it for the role it will play, openly or secretly, as long as humans are human.¹

This Plato saw clearly when he wrote of a Republic in which the whole of the soul—mind, passions, and bodily appetites—would be disciplined, enchanted, and harmonized not only by exercise in thinking, but by music and myth and daily familiarity with noble and beauteous forms. He feared, and rightly, the bloodless mind that reduced philosophical exploration to the kind of clever logic-chopping young people can be taught to do so facilely, and fancy themselves paragons of wisdom in doing it. Philosophezing must be concerned with truth, evidence, and argu-
ment, Plato saw, but never reduced to that concern. For the mysterious visage of Being radiates more than truth: it shines out as Goodness and Beauty as well; the true shepherd of Being has to be educated to yearn for Goodness, and, most important, to respond with “reverence and awe” to the sometimes tragic demands of Justice and Piety, Beauty and Nobility. Only such a fully developed human being can grow out of egotism, surmount credulity, and then be trusted to philosophize with the interests of the wider human community at heart.

Something very like this evaluation of the philosopher’s task, one may think, lay behind Aristotle’s reluctance to teach philosophy to the young: they lack the “experience” that furnishes the truly ripe materials for responsible ethical pondering, but the experience that also seasons and matures the one pondering as well. Only the morally wise can decipher the demands of moral wisdom, much as the properly sensitized spectator is alone attuned to catch the solemn cadences of tragic drama.

Those ancients thought of philosophy as a way of life, an art of living wisely, responsive to the fullness of Being’s riddling self-revelations. So for the Stoics, Plotinus, and Augustine, philosophy and spirituality coalesced into the single task of producing human beings worthy of the title “wise,” seekers, lovers, and “musicians” all in one. Only such a fully ripened human being, they were persuaded, can look with an artist’s practiced eye at the evils of our universe, and be large enough in spirit to assent that it is “good, very good”—good, and hauntingly beautiful, a *carmen universitatis*. Aquinas brought the message forward with his emphasis on the power of “knowledge by connaturality,” that sympathetic conformation to the “temperament of nature” itself, and writes an extended treatise on how the “passions” of the soul both might and must be tempered and refined to play their proper role of resonating with Being in all its rich variety.
Descartes rang in the modern epoch by accusing will and passions of unlawful entry into the philosophic man­sion; with him, and with the rise of modern science, we have witnessed the triumph of that passionless, “objec­tive” spectator, pure reason. Kant showed in turn how little that pure reason could confidently pronounce upon the central questions that decide the hopes and ideals of man­kind, but now epistemology took up its reign, a solitary eminence presiding over a desert landscape from which feelings, emotions, and passions had been peremptorily banished. There might be more things in life than were dreamed of by this philosophy, but the philosopher was sternly warned to keep them for dreaming hours only, at least until this passionless mind could minister to the myopia it brought to its own inspection of them. Being, for this critical mind’s eye, shrank down to “the true”; only the “certain” was of any valid interest, along with the canons of evidence and argument the mind kept sharpen­ing, sharpening to hunt that elusive quarry. Subjectivity was equated with subjectivism; passionate thinking was always dangerous. The intruder must be kept at bay, or exiled to alien fields like poetry, literature, and religion: suspect exercises in self-indulgence on which the philoso­pher must glare with baleful eye, if indeed he glance at them at all. That Orpheus figure, the passionate thinker, was replaced by the ascetic and slightly anemic school­master, the academic philosopher.

Pascal protested: the “god of the philosophers” had no heart. Johann Fichte protested mightily: this tyranny of the epistemological sapped the human being of all the energy required to fulfill the moral “Vocation of Man.” Nietzsche protested: the Apollonian had throttled the Dionysiac, and humans no longer learned to dance. The Romantic poets flooded the world with protests: the rainbow was more than an optical equation, and skylarks more than ornithological specimens. The din became more deaf-
ening, but our desiccated devotee of certitude answered it by mounting higher in his lonely tower where, in reedy voices, he and his companions talked of logic, and analysis, and the shoddy tricks that poets played with their unscientific abuses of language. Soon, nobody else was listening.

But now the din is being raised in other quarters. The very ones most trusted to hold aloft the banner of passionless objectivity are proving disloyal; Michael Polanyi, Jacob Bronowski, Thomas Kuhn are bruiting it about that, whatever “routine” scientists might think, imagination, aesthetic sensibility, all the juices of the “personal” and passion-laden, do indeed run through the veins of every creative scientist. Not so surprising, after all, Dewey would have commented: for wasn’t science itself, at bottom, a form of “art”?

Philosophers themselves, we are now being told, must abandon their obsessive concern with the search for epistemological “foundations,” and take their marching orders from the pragmatism of James and Dewey. The quest for a foundational philosophy has proven futile; we must recognize that there is “no method of knowing when one has reached the truth,” give up our “hope of getting things right,” and content ourselves with “clinging together against the dark.” Philosophizing is simply an unending “Socratic conversation,” but “We are not conversing because we have a goal,” the discovery of truth.³

The quandary that inspires this counsel of despair is very real; but everything we have seen in this study indicates that the solution is far from Jamesian.⁴ For nothing could be clearer than James’s passionate conviction that in claiming that we are free, that life is worth living, and that our belief in God’s existence is closer to the truth than its opposite number, he had “gotten it right.” But he came to those convictions precisely by adopting an epistemological “rule” that the entire drift of post-Cartesian
philosophy would call into question: that taking the risks involved in arriving at the truth is a sounder way of approaching these questions than succumbing to the fear of error. This obliged, and therefore (he felt) entitled, him deliberately to invite the passional side of human nature to enter as an ingredient in the very process of philosophizing, to think, not as dispassionate mind, but as total human being. He knew full well the fears others had expressed about the passional, but he saw them as stemming from an undiscriminated notion of that side of our nature. Think "passional," and you must think wildness, uncontrol, anarchy, egotistic self-indulgence, subjectivism, relativism, wishful thinking at its least responsible—in short, the "chaos come again" that his friend Dickinson Miller deplored. Think "passional," in other words, and frequently the last thing it suggests is the synonym that James proposed for it at its educated best: "character." Yet that was his hope for, and trust in, the passional side of our nature which the universe itself endows us with, surely not out of sheer malevolence. That hope he shared with Plato, Aquinas, and even (in certain of his moods at least) Nietzsche: that the passional can be tamed, controlled, actually rendered clairvoyant; that it can be not only governed but invited into the very citadel of governance, bringing with it the fire that fuels the total human response to Being in all its facets.

But that hope, that project for development of the passional, suggests how James might have replied to the counsel of despair alluded to above: that it issued from the very spirit of desiccated inquiry, obsession with "method," which prompted the despair in the first place. Instead of following that counsel, we must turn, instead, or perhaps return, to educating complete human beings rather than bloodless minds. The philosopher may reply that his function is a limited one: that literature and the arts are better designed for the tasks of developing the lively yet chas-
tened sensibility, the leaping imagination, the ripened life of feeling, emotion, passion, which must be trusted to contribute to, rather than intrude upon, the human task of reading the temperament of nature. This, the philosopher may protest, is not our “job,” not our “professional responsibility.” That, I suggest, James would consider an abdication. For to be a genuine philosopher is more than a job, more than a profession: James, one has to speculate, would have thought it, as Fichte did, more a vocation. In answering to that vocation, the philosopher must answer from the fullness of a mature humanity: he must embody, in himself and in his manner of philosophizing, the synthesis not only of respect for facts and careful exactitude in reasoning about them, but of sensibility also, of imagination, feeling, and passion—the synthesis he hopes his students may, each in their individual mode, eventually replicate.

No single philosopher can ever claim to fit that description perfectly. But in significant ways the portrait resembles James: and this, I submit, is why young students, budding philosophers as they natively are before we manage to thin out their blood, feel they can trust the judgments of a man who obviously succeeded in becoming and remaining so thoroughly human. For this is the test that, in the end, sane human beings inevitably apply to their mentors: are they, too, sane and fully human? Have they made the acquaintance of reality in all its exuberant richness, not only accurately but sensitively, analyzing, yes, but musing and pondering as well, even dreaming; occasionally, perhaps, as Plato intimated, praying? The educated judgment of one attuned this way to nature’s temperament may not always get it exactly right. But still, James would reply, sanity urges us to judge that such a person cannot be too far off the mark. At very least, he or she will provide us with something that has enough of the solid ring of reality about it to ground the largest choices.
life commands that we make, and does not permit us indefinitely to postpone.

That, I submit, is the most we can ask of any human thinker. It is still a great deal. Not only will it have to do; it will do.

NOTES

1. "It is utterly hopeless," James writes in SR 92, "to try to exorcise such sensitiveness by calling it the disturbing subjective factor, and branding it as the root of all evil. 'Subjective' be it called! and 'disturbing' to those whom it foils! But if it helps those who, as Cicero says, 'vim naturae magis sentiunt,' it is good and not evil."

2. After reading a preliminary draft of this study, Professor John Lachs suggested that a probe into James's philosophical relationship to Fichte could shed important light on the development of his thought. I cannot but agree: the resonances with Fichte's *The Vocation of Man* ringing throughout these popular lectures seem to me, as to Lachs, unmistakable.


4. In WB, for instance, after as withering a critique of the various foundational "tests" for truth as Rorty's own (pp. 14–17), James goes on to say: "But please observe, now, that when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself. We still pin our faith on its existence, and still believe that we gain an ever better position towards it . . ." (WB 17).